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## COMMENTARY

It is a year now since the death of Dylan Thomas. But his poems, stories, and drama move farther, faster, and for an infinitely longer time than the man. It is perhaps fitting then that this memorial issue should be published in a town he never knew, by people who never knew him.

These articles and poems are a way of naming him and closing, for a moment, some of the distance between Dylan Thomas and his work. Best, of course, to have known him and to read him; but another way of knowing is to see his light broken up, prismatically, in his friends and his readers.

W. S. B.

The Yale Literary Magazine wishes to thank John Hunter, Chairman 1952, who proposed the issue and gathered the material for it; and George Kirgo for his advice and assistance to Mr. Hunter and to the magazine.

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## Some Memories of Dylan Thomas

There was something impish about Dylan Thomas and there should be something impish in me now to tell the truth about him. There should be such a thrust, but such a thrust would jar things and it is not time to tell the truth. Perhaps it is never time. Perhaps the truth would be Comic when we live under a predilection that it is Tragic. The fact is that we live the truth but cannot tell the truth. Poetry is involved in the truth and is the final truth, but, by paradox, it is a parcel of myth; which is to use the word not in pejoration but in praise, and to use another word were probably better. Say then poetry is myth or sleight-of-hand-sleight-of-mind tricks to show iridescent qualities of the soul. Is not Thomas' poetry a continuous artifice in this sense, a series of masks each paradoxically revealing the truth, or part of the truth, and is not his conscious craftsmanship itself an ability of the self to fend off reality so that reality will not be used up, a deftness to vary the conception with every poem, with every year, with every new insight, a consuming making of reality in the form of poetry, so that the total depth of life will never be exhausted?

Thus his poems, every one a struggle, were composed at once with dynamic energy springing from some genius not to be quite described or quite named and at the same time from some sly, cool, subtle, controlled intellectual craftsmanship, so that he knew, quite well, what effects he was preparing as he prepared them. He composed harmony from the fusion of these two forces.

One should talk of the impishness, if that is a good term for it, in Dylan. I should recall a blond girl living in our house when he first came to Cambridge for his first reading, and by what impishness he astounded her on the ride over from the South Station to Cambridge; how he astounded Matthiessen before the reading; how he delighted everybody in his actual performance; how he shocked and astounded everybody at the Advocate party afterward, and I should tell just what he said; how he astounded everybody later in the evening at Matty's, and I should tell just what he did, how he still astounded a late small group at Wilbur's; and how my wife and Charlee Wilbur had finally to deposit him in his Harvard guest house in the small hours, and just how they did it, how they had to do it.

I should then have to go on to reveal those startling truths of his progressions nearby, with friends, to various places for readings.

But it is not time to tell the truth, maybe it is never time. Everybody connected with him has his own adventures to remember.

I should have to tell how, on his second trip here, when he stayed at our house, my wife tried valiantly to get him to eat something, but only succeeded in four days with one piece of bacon; how I had to (and was delighted to) get him up in the morning by plugging his mouth with a bottle of beer, this wonderful baby.

I should have to recount how, just after dinner before I was to introduce him at the Brattle Theatre for his first reading of verse drama in America under the auspices of our Poets' Theater, he had not yet decided what to read, and with what instantaneous deftness and command he decided, once several of us had ransacked book cases and thrust probable books into his hands, exactly what he wanted to read and was prepared for action on the instant. Then to leap onto the stage and give a stirring, memorable reading from Webster, Marlowe, Beddoes, Lear, and finally his own poems.

I should have to recount many charming episodes, as, that my wife, when we took him to the airport early on a cold morning to take a plane, clad in the dirty thin one suit he had brought from Florida, gave him my Naval Officer's raincoat, which we never saw again. Incidentally, how at the airport, amazed as always at American gadgets, he delighted in the machinery that produced cokes, and had four before stepping onto the plane. And how, through the aid of John Brinnin a very long time later, Dylan sent the coat back from Wales, but this time it was an odd, little, tattered British affair all buttons and flaps, no bigger than he, his own coat, which I could not wear.

I should have to recount a time with Dylan and Caitlin which was to have been a half-hour at midday but which went on in talk and drink for ten hours.

One should tell the truth. One should put down all the stories before time dims their contours or presses them into some unnatural shape. In fact, the impishness I began on as a quality of his was less apparent from his second visit to these shores, and could not be made out as a permanent characteristic.

If I were more impish myself now I should relate the truth! One cannot tell the truth. It would be too harsh, too unbelievable; too rich, too deep, too wild, and too strange. The truth is more dramatic than fictions. It should be confided in this case to private papers and left to posterity. One has to defend Dylan against the total humanity of the man.

Others knew Dylan much better than I did, but I loved the man. I hope all who knew him will want to write down their impressions. He was so natural, friendly, jolly and bright (without ostentation) that personal reminiscences of him should be preserved. Already there are critical appraisals; time will accrete more of these.

One shudders at the depths of the truth. I found myself thinking, after the shock of his death, that he had been a long term suicide and that a drive to destruction was inextricably bound up with his genius, somehow, itself; that his high and wordy nature demanded the extreme penalty for being completely itself; that he could no more escape his death than he could his genius; and that he lived and died to exalt mankind and to express something recurrent and ineffable in the spirit of man, the strength of the imagination, the exaltation of the soul.

---

*He was true to his gift and he had a mighty power, indigenously accurate like nature's. And his mechanism at times is as precise as the content.*

Marianne Moore

## Life, Literature, and Dylan

Dylan Thomas told me once that he found it difficult to converse with actors because they had only one subject of conversation—themselves. The Welsh writer was, of course, himself an actor, inspired reader, superb mimic, irresistible comedian, soulful clown; words rolled and danced on his tongue; but more than an actor, he was a poet, and of himself he rarely spoke. When he did, it was in asides, quick, bubbly, embarrassed, as if he wanted to get on with something more important—the story to be told, the joke to be brought to the proper roaring conclusion. How much indeed there was to get on with, and how lively and real it was to those of us who listened!

Oddly enough we met at All Souls in Oxford. A. L. Rowse had invited us to lunch, and I shall never forget the first sight of Dylan and Caitlin in those august surroundings, Dylan in a bright checked suit and rakish pancake cap, Caitlin all gold and red, completely the dancer, seeming to whirl in her bright skirts even when still. They were "country," as one of Eudora Welty's Mississippi characters might put it, and they didn't mind letting the world know that there was something more important than literature, and that was life. Let geese honk below the windows, and beer spill over the tables; life was to be lived. It was life that counted.

There was not much of the "literary" about Dylan Thomas, but he knew his craft as only the finest craftsman can; and he was brilliant, when he chose to be, in literary asides. If he spoke of poetry, it was usually to praise the poems of a friend, or to quote some lines from Hardy. He could be devastating, too, with quick thrusts at certain contemporaries, at the bumbling, the pretentious, and the boring.

This perhaps is worth putting down. I remember that once in the midst of a dinner-party, when the conversation had turned to literary topics, he broke in. "There's nothing so beautiful," he said, and his hand shot up, "as a lark rising from a field. That's what we . . . we . . ." He left the sentence for us to complete.

I did not see him again after that year at Oxford but I never cease hearing of the effect he had in this country, of the sense of vitality—and nobility—he communicated wherever he went. His poetry, written from the roots of language, goes to the roots of life; and it touches us all.

In a house opposite the hospital in Greenwich Village where Dylan Thomas died a short time ago, I write these lines. I look up, beyond the neon lettering outside, toward those windows where he breathed his last; and as I do, the traffic noises subside, a familiar voice again fills the air. And the lark rises.

## For Dylan Thomas On the Day of His Death

"Do not go gentle into that good night," you told  
The old man. It was not gently that you went,  
You who were young. Nor gentle can be the lament  
Raised for you, near the white bed where you died,  
And raised in the wild wavebeaten countryside  
Of your own Wales when it's known there, raised again  
Wherever women who knew what your mad love meant  
Or men who drank with you beyond content  
Remember you. And raised, in a grief half anger and half pride,  
By those, your fellows, to whom your voice in song  
Belongs while ears are lent to it, and hearts  
Lean, too. "Do not go gentle into that good night,"  
Were almost the last words you spoke in verse.  
And now the night has got you. We rehearse  
Your admonition gravely, yet with laughter.  
How else think of you, who at your gravest were dafter  
Than all, and at your merriest, most grave?  
What's left? As long as records last, your voice;  
As long as speech sings, or song speaks, your songs;  
And courage, in the huge dark, to rejoice  
For the fountaining joys you knew in the living light.  
These shine in the darkness where you must lie now.  
Oh, is not that a lie? Dylan, good night.

## Death and Dylan Thomas

Gold, gong, of,  
Genius: continual, fire: leger, nobler,  
Of, lights. Genesis', fettled, dazer:  
Gold-coilèd, Adam: dare-Adam, voice.

*Sleep, Dylan.*

Deity, began, you, giant—  
In, Plato's, curve, single:  
And, now, Death, greatlaw, great,  
King-lighter, his, right, hand,  
Shines, your, name, the, whole, heaven, long.

*Sleep, Dylan.*

*Sleep, gentle, genius.* Very, Death, saith:  
This, death, I, annul . . .  
Eternity, bloodtells, him: O,  
From, his, lived—  
In, rose: into, life's, lifeline,  
Falcon-and-famous-verb, thrusts, him!  
And, exceller, beautiful,  
Commandant, incendiar, oh, nightgold,  
Forerunning, verb, myth-hard, he, stands.

## Four Poems

### I.

#### CHERRY LANE

When in the arched, reciprocal air  
You weave the poem,  
Elegiac and revealed,

We,

Aware of your public-ravaged face, and sensing  
The tense antennae of the room, and sharing  
Your tenuous feat of equilibrium,  
Tremble, ask the shroudword frame to bear  
The seething stresses lancinating there.

O sage enchanter, capel-child, forbear!  
Yours the deserved purple,  
Wear it with a wild grace!;  
Bend to your natural role, your twicecarved  
Place as herald.

Speak for the lovers, the saints your sinners  
And for all other seeking seekers  
Lost, who say  
That your recorded strategy  
Marks out their guilt, then  
Pointing to a starre, reminds the eye  
To cry the holyheart's tear,  
And claims you dybbuk for a Babel world.

II.

RIVERSIDE MUSEUM

He made the tyger burn  
in the cold by-river Hall  
for the wind-defying band  
he made a holyland  
and the ether run Love.

Later:

in the outer room  
signing his books

eyes pink-  
ly innocent  
all asking brow

the signing hand shook.

III.

THE WHITE HORSE TAVERN

altho  
it was many lives ago  
sometime between my crone and ghost

I served my heart up  
praise-trussed to the most  
lost and noble poet

I keep remembering  
the smile  
the bow  
and the four empty syllables

and the wound still sings.

IV.

ST. LUKE'S CHAPEL

When snow over rooftops and graves  
And a cold wind blowing,  
Presaged the evil news,  
O great was the grief then among us  
The unknown receivers.  
(. . . did you hail us as strangers?)

And lowly Ann was remembered,  
Whose bard you were, and her peace,  
And Manly your shining man who turned,  
Who fled the field too vast immense  
For lone reconnaissance.

You . . . the 'fuller minstrel', yes  
But even the unleast homing dove falters  
And fails in the unblest, radared air.

What many rhythms merged and burst  
When your harmonic struck, diminishing us,  
As your ark rays and sings

In our memory's sun.  
Now hold to your haloed loves in the last wave:  
There with your sealoves,  
Designed fish and steeplebird, Sail,  
And never to leave the dear towns again,  
In manfirst peace,  
To your ageless home,  
To Wales.

# The Death, and Some Dominions of It

*What colour is glory? death's feather? . . .*

Why do people *like* to have a poet die?

I am asking a question more complex than I can answer, though I am sure there are several answers which, if they could be synthesized, would combine to a profound answer. Among surviving poets there are certain to be some, when so famously successful a poet as Dylan Thomas dies, who find increased satisfaction with a world bereft of a talent too obviously bigger than their own: they are like those kings—in a line of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's—who after the fall of Napoleon "creep out to feel the sun." (The event really avails such poets nothing; but I am not arguing that any of the assumed advantages in the event are sane—they are merely human.) Mediocrity usually hates genius, yet there are still others of the lesser tribe who find some contentment in association with the celebrated, and so in his death a larger and more manipulative reflected glory.

Still, the satisfaction runs far beyond this or that small literary crowd. There has been this past year a widespread excitement. People have read obituaries, have read memorial articles, have heard of memorial meetings, have listened to broadcasts of Thomas' recordings of his prose and verse—people who heretofore have known nothing of Dylan Thomas; and they are impressed with Thomas and pleased with themselves. Why?

(Well, they are illustrating the old saw that a dead poet is a great man whereas the fellow who lives next door and writes poetry is obviously a damned fool.) they are acquainted with this one—how therefore can he be important or immortal? But there is a deeper psychology than this. I think people know, even when they know little about poetry and care less, that a poet serves Truth. Truth is an unpredictable, a dangerous thing; avoided by most people. A poet is a rebuke, a higher and more responsible consciousness in our midst. He is, while alive, more alive than most people.

The most people do not, of course, so phrase these things at all: they express them, rather, in at least an impatience with or at most a resentment of the impracticable, lifelong preoccupation of a poet. His very responsibility indeed is translated commonly as irresponsibility. Nevertheless, history assigns an "importance" to the great, the safely great, poets of the past. Now when a Dylan Thomas enters that past, people have him where they can use him, where they can control him, where they want him. And with a heightened satisfaction when their skepticisms are borne out, when as in Thomas' case the death seems wilful and his children require (of course!) the benefits of a Fund. This way, they can have a poet and eat him too. Yes, all the world loves a dead poet.

Death is the greatest dramatist: it gives final meaning to any life and objectifies it so all who will may see. And this is, as to Thomas, a time for regrets and laments and elegies. It should not be a time for lies. For how shall we give him the honor of understanding if we do not try fully to understand his life and his work? If we do not see that his poems are all parts of a single poem, and some but not all magnificent, if we do not define his limitations, we shall not define him; nor ourselves. And it is that ultimate definition for which poets exist.

While for his family and others who personally loved him Thomas' death is tragic loss, there are signs it was not tragic for him or for literature. The expense of energy on lesser things than his poems, the marked decrease of poetic production in his last decade, the forced and sometimes Yeats—or Thomas—derivative not of what he did produce: all this may mean he was spared a long Swinburnian death-in-life. The talents, after all, were similar; like Swinburne, Thomas was an intoxicant of words and with a few young things to say.

His potent nostalgias were two: back to childhood and forward to oblivion. Edith Sitwell thinks Thomas "knew that he must die young." Must, in what sense? He speaks in his 35th-birthday poem of "midlife" in a way which seems not to mean "amidst life" but, literally, "halfway to threescore and ten":

Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined  
And druid herons' vows  
The voyage to ruin I must run, . . .

No, I think (though I did not know him) he did not feel he was fated to die young. But the evidence shows that he pursued self-destruction and accomplished it: he wanted to die. Why?

The question would seem easy if asked about a poet who had suffered neglect, had no influence, felt either mistaken or ignored. On the contrary Thomas, supremely in my generation, received every kind of exterior reward. But the real sense of failure is as private as despair, and no man knows what another conception of it may be. That stress between childhood and death admitted little of adult life into his poetry. Did the genes which made possible "Fern Hill" and "Poem in October" seed also a fatal drive? We have yet to discover and decide. Did Thomas, like an athlete, feel that he had had his triumph? Well, he has it; and after the curious repercussions of his death are gone—the confused mourning of it, the leeching upon it, the goddamned gratifications out of it—a few of his pages, fixed among the English poets', will carry that triumph still.



# Dylan Thomas and The Poetic Drama

## I

Over ten years ago Dylan Thomas was commissioned by the B. B. C. to write *Quite Early One Morning*, a description of a small Welsh seaside town much like his own Laungharne. This became, in time, *Llareggub*,<sup>1</sup> *A Piece for Radio Perhaps*, first published in *Botteghe Oscure IX* in 1952. Considerably revised and enlarged, it was read at The Poetry Center of the YW & YMHA in New York City on the fourteenth and twenty-eighth<sup>2</sup> of May, 1953, as *Under Milk Wood, a Play for Voices*, and twice again, in a version further expanded, in October of 1953, two weeks before Dylan Thomas' death, the poet himself reading the parts of the First Voice and the Reverend Eli Jenkins in all four performances. Two more readings were given at The Poetry Center in February of 1954 for the Dylan Thomas Fund. The play was produced over the B. B. C. on January 25, 1954, printed in a version cut by the poet in the February, 1954, issue of *Mademoiselle*, then published complete and uncut by Dent in London in March, and by New Directions Press in April of 1954, though in a version which the poet still thought was incomplete and imperfect.

*Under Milk Wood* is, as Thomas explained in a letter published in *Botteghe Oscure*, "a play, an impression for voices" in which he wished to write "simply and warmly and comically with lots of movement and varieties of moods, so that, at many levels, through sight and speech, description and dialogue, evocation and parody, you came to know the town as an inhabitant of it." There is no plot but chronology; the town and its inhabitants are followed by an omniscient, moving camera ear and eye from a pre-dawn "bible-black" night through the awakening expositions of early morning, "through the long, lazy lyrical afternoon, through the multifariously busy little town evening of meals and drinks and loves and quarrels and dreams and wishes, into the night and the slowing-down lull again and the repetition of the first word: Silence."

To a foreign or unsympathetic understanding the townspeople may seem odd, strange, eccentric, abnormal, immoral, unethical and, in short, mad. Indeed, one of Thomas' tentative titles for his sketch had been *The Town That Was Mad*,<sup>3</sup> in which he planned to have the sane people of the world boycott the town as an "insane area."

<sup>1</sup> Read backwards.

<sup>2</sup> Not, as in Daniel Jones' "Preface" to the London and New York editions, on May 15 and 29.

<sup>3</sup> Not, as in Daniel Jones, *ibid.* *The Town Was Mad*.

The indignant citizenry protest and take the issue to court, but when they hear a total description of what the world thinks constitutes an ideally sane town, they withdraw their defense and themselves demand to be fenced off from contamination. Mary Ann Sailors every morning shouts her exact age to the heavens, for she believes the town to be the Chosen Land, and the River Dewi the River of Jordon. "She is not at all mad," wrote Thomas, "she merely believes in heaven on earth. And so with all of them, all the eccentrics whose eccentricities . . . are but briefly and impressionistically noted: all, by their own right, are ordinary and good; and the First Voice, and the poet preacher, never judge nor condemn but explain and make strangely simple and simply strange."

This understanding and identification stemmed from Dylan Thomas' own large, comprehending and compassionate nature. His own character was much loved yet much misunderstood in America, for he accepted all people as he himself thought to be accepted, as "strangely simple and simply strange," with all the foibles, difficulties and dangers peculiar to all individuals but even more peculiar to the creative temperament whose imagination fires up from a free, inspired, Dionysian source. A daemonic poetic temperament such as Dylan Thomas' is, in this sense, *tempered* only in its own fire. If he was ever rude or bawdy, as his townspeople often are, this was in reaction to the sane, innane sterilities of those who make conformity and decorum the conventional tomb of the untrammeled imagination. His was the poet's eye rolling in a fine frenzy. It never occurred to him even to *forgive* others as he might hope to be forgiven, for that would have been condescension cutting both ways. He accepted as he hoped to be accepted and as, on the imaginative plane, he beautifully was. And when he died he was well on the road to making not only the people both of a real and an imaginary town, but even his own character and his own language "strangely simple and simply strange." He would, in the end, have had the approval of two other great organists and contrivers of language: Milton, who several centuries ago defined poetry as simple, sensuous, passionate speech, and Hopkins who sought the particular instress and inscape of every individual thing, "Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)/With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim." And just as Hopkins wrote that these dappled contraries "He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:/Praise Him," so Thomas wrote of his work that "These poems, with all their crudities, doubts, and confusion, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God."

## II.

As poet and playwright Dylan Thomas was undergoing the difficulties and transitions of craft and temperament recently diagnosed by his senior, T. S. Eliot, with moving candor in *East Coker* and helpful self-examination in his recent talks *Poetry and Drama* and *The Three Voices of Poetry*. The first voice, says Eliot, is that of the poet talking to himself, or to no one, with no attempt to communicate, though he may, of course, be *overheard*. This adequately defines much of Eliot's and Thomas' earlier work and offers a clue to the obscure transitions between images and ideas which exist in the creator's mind but are unavailable at times to the reader. The second voice is that of the poet addressing an audience, as in the dramatic monologue, much as the choruses of Eliot's *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral* speak for the poet, "not uttering words that really represent any supposed character of their own," or much as the First and Second Voices, the Reverend Eli Jenkins, and even blind Captain Cat (the Tiresias of the play) speak for Dylan Thomas in *Under Milk Wood*, for none of these speak to any living person, but are commentators or chorus, "really a kind of conscience," says Thomas, a "guardian angel." The third voice is that of the poet when he confines himself to the problem of "one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character," when the poet is no longer speaking in his own person though

wearing the mask of another, but when he wishes to project independent characters living in their own right (no matter how germinal in the poet) and who conflict, misunderstand or try to understand one another. This third voice, which Eliot found for himself in *The Cocktail Party* and in *The Confidential Clerk*, was Thomas' constant concern during the past ten years since he began the various versions of *Under Milk Wood*, simplified the first voice of his own poetry, and wrote for the more public confinements of radio and screen. William Butler Yeats underwent a similar shift from subjectivity to objectivity during his twenty and more years with the Abbey Theatre, from the private mists of *The Shadowy Waters* to the seared refinements of *Purgatory*.

The poetic dramatist today must be paramount in the characterizations of the third voice, and must solve the problem of rhythm in which the problem of diction is involved. In the characterization, plot, and diction of his prose, as in the metaphors and images of his lyrical poetry, Dylan Thomas had undergone a similar transition from the condensed, obscure subjectivity of his early work to the more expanded dramatic objectivity of his later prose and poetry. We may trace this progression from the early lyrical and autobiographical stories such as *The Orchards*, to the stories in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, through the variety of projected characterizations of the two published sections of his unfinished novel, *Adventures in the Skin Trade* and *Four Lost Souls*, to final triumphant culmination in the *dramatis personae* of his film scenario *The Doctor and the Devils*. It is this scenario which most convinces us that Thomas was essentially a dramatist of a high order, capable of objectifying characters as diversified, on the one hand, as Rock, Murray, Annabella, and Elizabeth, and as, on the other hand, Jenny, Fallon, Broom, and a host of minor characters, each one clearly differentiated from the other and speaking a prose which is sharp, distinct, cultivated or dialectical according to dramatic or temperamental need. The same fecundity and objectivity is evident in the many varied inhabitants of Llareggub in *Under Milk Wood*, whether in description or in colloquy. Indeed, Thomas had, in addition, a talent special to the ancient Greek dramatists who could create types that were also individuals, somewhat analogous, by inversion, to Shakespeare who could raise his individuals to universal significance. Thomas' Dai Bread, Lord Cut-Glass, Polly Garter, Nogood Boyo, Captain Cat, Mae Rose Cottage—to list only some of these whose names personify what they allegorize—are both individuals and types, as are all the characters of *Under Milk Wood*, unlike the personifications, say, of *Everyman*, of the *Fairy Queen*, or of *Pilgrim's Progress*. Thomas' love and understanding of people from a broad area of humanity—as contrasted to Eliot's vulgarization of the lower and middle orders and sympathetic identification with persons only of the upper classes—his zest for life and play, his roaring boy's delight in the bawdy, in the strange as well as the commonplace, his gift for comedy, even his own magnificent ability to "ham" and act out his characters and recite his poetry and that of others gives more than sufficient proof that he had in abundance those qualities for dramatic identification often lacking in the poet turned dramatist. Thomas, like Eliot in another manner, was from the beginning a dramatist in his lyric verse, in the explosive, dualistic, conflicting pyrotechnics of his tropes and images. These needed only to be clarified and objectified with maturity and experience to become embodiments on the stage of the drama whirling with such condensed speed in the revolving stage of his imagination.

His chief problem was that of rhythm and of the words of sound, meaning and imagery carried on that flood. Before the idea of *Under Milk Wood* came to him he was, he wrote, "working on a play, mostly in verse. This, I have reluctantly, and, I hope, only temporarily, abandoned: the language was altogether swamping the subject: the comedy, for that was what it was originally intended to be, was lost in the complicated violence of the words: I found I was labouring at each line as though I was making some savage, and devious, metaphysical lyric and not a play at all." Here Thomas could have learned from the experiments of Eliot for the stage and of MacLeish in verse plays for the radio, both of whom have utilized an attenuated form of sprung rhythm by formulating lines based, not on metrical accent and even syllabification, but on a regular number of prose stresses to a line with either no syllables or an irregular

number of syllables between stresses. This rhythm, as Eliot has pointed out, is capable of great flexibility, keeping its regular beat though it ranges from an uneven syllabification approximating prose speech to the regularity of both beat and syllable approximating traditional meter when the emotion becomes heightened or intense, carrying with it an appropriate heightening in diction. But Thomas has been, until very recently, as timid in metrical experimentation as he has been bold in tropic amalgamation. Although *Under Milk Wood* seems to be written in a prose medium, it is in truth written with much regularity in iambic-anapestic of no line length and with but normal variation. Sometimes a certain metrical pattern is repeated, as in "sung like a linnet, crowned you with a flagon, tattooed with mermaids, thirst like a dredger, died of blisters." At times, as in the single-line colloquies of the Five Drowned, or in the discussion about the Waldos between the First and Second Neighbors, Thomas utilizes —either deliberately or instinctively—a two-beat line of sprung rhythm; but there is no consistent linear beat throughout the play. Indeed, it may be argued that the particular beauty of his lyrical poetry as craft has lain in the combination of his regularity of traditional metric with an irregularity of trope, in the classic simplicity of his meters and stanzaic composition with the romantic almost surrealist violence of his diction. This dichotomy served him well in the condensed small scope of the lyric (as it has served Robert Lowell) but defeated him in the larger more ample conflicts of poetic drama. On the one extreme, therefore, he abandoned his earlier attempt at verse drama when the first voice usurped control, and on the other extreme completed a film scenario in prose where he succeeded in projecting the third voice of drama, and he compromised, to a degree, in *Under Milk Wood* where all three voices are heard.

... *Under Milk Wood* is therefore quasi-dramatic in form and technique. The first voice is heard in the interspersed lyrics, and often in the diction of the commentators where the second voice predominates and where Thomas speaks through the monologues and masks of his 'guardian angels': First Voice, Second Voice, Reverend Eli Jenkins, and Captain Cat. The third and purely dramatic voice is heard in the conversations of the *dramatis personae*. Thomas succeeds in blending all three dramatically because he set out to write, in fact, not a true play but "an impression for voices," for reading and not for playing, a quasi-dramatic form valid for the radio, and even for cinema and television, a form more highly perfected in some respects by MacLeish and ignored by Eliot. He has not confined his presentation in the ironies of closet drama which make Shelley's *The Cenci* or Milton's *Samson Agonistes* all but unplayable, and which has lent an air of preciousness and artifice to many of the plays by poets presented by The Artists Theater in New York City where I once took Dylan Thomas and Arthur Miller to watch, in *The Bait* by James Merrill—one of the best poets of the younger generation—a drowning man soliloquize in sestina. Although Arthur Miller asserts the necessity for a rebirth of poetic diction and rhythm in drama, he found these plays lacking in dramaturgy and immediacy, and Dylan Thomas thought them too cold and acrobatic in their poetic dexterity. A distinction must be made between the staging of poetry and the imaginative speech of characters in dramatic action. The play which Thomas abandoned, parts of *Under Milk Wood*, and Merrill's *The Bait*, nonetheless, can bear that provocative and procreative relation to a poetic dramatist's future work which the couplet-quatrains-sonnet-embedded *Love's Labour Lost* and *Romeo and Juliet* bear to *The Tempest*. The dramatic action in *Under Milk Wood* lies in the voices heard and not necessarily seen, in the excitement, humor, flights of fancy, puns, orchestrations, play on words, rhymes and other purely poetic devices which the poet informs with dramatic conflict, sometimes with swift clarity, sometimes with a tumbling cascade of purely verbal effects, and sometimes with that "complicated violence of words" which altogether swamped the play he abandoned. As he directed the rehearsals of his play at The Poetry Center, Thomas would tell his actors over and over again, after long sessions involving characterization, timing, and other dramaturgical devices, "Remember, it's all in the *words*. *Love* the *words*, and it will be good!" It must be stressed, however, as Eliot has not noted, that in such a quasi-dramatic form meant to be heard rather than to be seen—whether on stage or over the air—the excitement

of the diction itself, up to a degree, must carry much of the dramatic conflict and interest. Thomas knew how to inform words, single or in groups, with dramatic impact. Eliot himself, as he is quite aware, has been so preoccupied in his last two plays with the problem of rhythm and realistic characterization that his people speak in the rhythm but not the diction of poetry, in a rhythmical but unimaginative language often in no way distinguishable from prose.

Although *The Doctor and the Devils* with its prose clarity, and *Under Milk Wood* with its poetic fecundity are at poles apart, they are both cinematic in structure. Though *Under Milk Wood* was first written for radio and then read on the stage, it is truly meant for the screen or television: with its quick shifts of short scenes from one group of characters to another, with its close and far shots, its fade outs and fade ins, its panning and dissolves as voices merge into one another while the camera eye sees what the "guardian angels" describe, whether the characters themselves, the cobble-stone streets, the pinkwashed houses, the shingles and sound of the sea, or the slow deep salt and silent black bandaged night flushing from dawn to noon to bible-black and concluding silence again. As it now stands, *Under Milk Wood* would make a great dramatic poem of the cinema. Dylan Thomas might have continued to explore and expand in this medium, or he may have transferred his fluid scenes, with more dramatic progression and plot, to a modern Elizabethan stage. This lay within his present range of accomplishment. But he might have gone further. He might have combined, with his genius and in his own way, both that imaginative language with which Shakespeare explored and laid bare the inner drama of heart and mind, together with the realistic depiction of characters and of contemporary problems to which Ibsen has accustomed us in the "well-made" play. He would then have bridged that gap between imaginative speech and realistic characterization and setting which has been the problem no less of the lyric and epic poet as well as that of the poetic dramatist. Eliot has given us lately the well-made play and contemporary setting, but he has been sparing in his poetry. Tennessee Williams in *Camino Real* gave us an easy symbolism, a quick allegory and spurious poetry, but Robert Sherwood in *The Petrified Forest* or Arthur Miller in *Death of a Salesman* strain to reach a dimension unavailable to dramaturgy and disclosed only to the transcending vision and craft of the poet. Again, Eliot with one of his precise almost academic insights, has written that "if we are to have a poetic drama, it is more likely to come from poets learning to write plays, than from skillful prose dramatists learning to write poetry." Maxwell Anderson is a case in point. That Dylan Thomas in his later stories, in *The Doctor and the Devils*, in *Under Milk Wood*, had all the qualities that go to making a superb dramatist, these works testify. That he is one of the great lyric poets of our era needs no testifying. That the world has lost in him a poetic dramatist of unusual worth there can be little doubt.<sup>4</sup>

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FROM MY DOUBTLESS LIMITED POINT OF VIEW THE ONLY THING  
TO SAY ABOUT DYLAN THOMAS IS THAT BEING A TRUE POET HE'S ALIVE.

E. E. Cummings

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<sup>4</sup> I should like to thank Miss Elizabeth Reitell, former Assistant Director of the Poetry Center, for sending me valuable information, and for kindly reading and correcting my manuscript.

## A First Word

When I was at school in Edinburgh as a boy, I bought for no reason a copy of *Eighteen Poems*, and carried it everywhere until I had pawed the cover off. For no reason, because I was not then faintly interested in poetry as poetry, I read the book with awe, in a pure literary innocence. It was an astonishment that nowhere fitted into the world as I knew it then. Walking home across the park, I would say single lines to myself over and over again. The words seemed to me as absolute and inevitable as air, and I could not conceive of them as ever having been written by anyone. Even now, through the clutter of literary know-how that accumulates round our reading, I think the poems insist on a similar innocence from anyone who wishes to read them well.

The matter of all the scattered fragments of conversation I had, here, there, and everywhere with Dylan Thomas was most of the time words themselves; or if we talked of things outside them, the words chosen took more than their customary share of attention. He often suspended talk to roll the last words, his own or anyone else's, round his head. Sometimes, in the middle of someone's sentence, he would hear a word he wanted and would save it, saying it over once or twice to make sure it was still there. He would talk to anyone about anything, listening intently to their words, because it always seemed incredible to him that there could be a word for things. I remember both his delight over sub-titling himself for an advertising man, "The Ugly Suckling," and his astonishment when we found once on a menu that the word "live" backwards spelt "evil." It was the same astonishment that he would fix suddenly on a man rolling barrels in the street, or a face, or an egg.

He was, I think, very shy of the unspoken; when he met people, he would always wait, outside of them, until they had spoken for a time. Once in New York, not long before he died, he was talking about writing. "When I experience anything," he said, "I experience it as a thing and a word at the same time, both equally amazing." He told me once that writing the "Ballad of the Long Legged Bait" had been like carrying a huge armful of words to a table he thought was upstairs, and wondering if he could reach it in time, or if it would still be there.

The relation between a poet and his poetry, like that between husbands and wives, is often very far below the surface, unexpected, confusing, perhaps impossible to find. With Dylan Thomas, it was clean and clear. When he was busy with them, existence and language were to him twin miracles. His poetry was trying always to make them simultaneously dawn, as they dawned on him. It seems to me that his poetry, whatever its literary fate, covers prior to anything the miracle of the first speaking creation, the wonder of words bringing about the wonder beyond them.\* And sometimes, in the middle of talk, one saw in the same way the man who praised existence because it would have been inconceivable to him not to, who wrote with a grateful amazement that such a thing as poetry was possible at all.

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\* It is not so much poetry about a world which exists in time and place; it is poetry which is continually bringing a world into existence, as for the first time.

## Dylan Thomas

Strange to say I remember Dylan Thomas better as a prose writer than a poet. His *Portrait of The Artist as a Young Dog* and the short accounts and stories written at that time made a great impression on me. I was not then familiar with his poetry. I see in retrospect a view of an English sea resort inhabited by real enough young women and men who lived in boarding houses of the cheaper sort and there carried on their reckless lives. There were views of the sea itself and of a carnival spirit that led to violence and in the end to an amnesic sequence where the author was left going up and downstairs in pursuit of a girl whom he never found. It is an impression of Dylan Thomas which has colored all that I have learned of him subsequently.

There is another view of him that I have kept when he spoke of himself as a half-grown boy perpetually in trouble over stolen fruit, trespasses beyond walls and troubles of every sort.

The poem must have been, as it is for such young men, an escape. Being a Welshman it had to take the form primarily of a song which for any man, limits it to his youth. But if a man can sing and Dylan Thomas could that with distinction, what else matters? Not old age, Dylan Thomas appeared never to think of old age and need not have thought of it. It is as if he always meant to escape it, and now without any loss to his lasting fame he has done just that.

Reading over his collected poems I have thought of what chances he had to enhance his fame by thinking again and perhaps more profoundly of what he had in mind. But what can be more profound than song? The only thing that can be asked is whether a man is content with it. It is not a drawing room atmosphere that produced the tragedy of King Lear. Wasn't Lear himself a Welshman? But was Dylan Thomas capable of developing the profound attitudes of a Lear? If he was and his scholarship gave evidence of it, he might have gone on to write a verse tragedy—though the times are all against it.

Politer verse, more in the English style, appears to have been impossible for Thomas, it's a constitutional matter, in which a man has no choice. At least I don't think it was a choice that was open to him. Thomas was a lyric poet and, I think a great one. Such memorable poems as "Over Sir Johns' Hill" and, even more to be emphasized, "On His Birthday," are far and away beyond the reach of any contemporary English or American poet. Not only in the contrapuntal metaphors which he uses, the fugue-like overlay of his language does he excel, but he is outstanding in the way he packs the thought in among the words. For it is not all sound and image, but the ability to think is there also with a flaming conviction that clinches each point as the images mount. The clarity of his thought is not obscured by his images but rather emphasized.

The wind does "whack" as the hawk which is "on fire" hangs still in the sky. This devotional poem which in its packed metaphors shows a man happy in his fate though soon to die shows Dylan Thomas in a triumphant mood, exultant. What else can a man say or be. He carries the image through to a definite conclusion and as a lyric poet at his best does show the sparks of light which convinces us that he means what he says. He includes the whole world in his benisons.

The second poem, "Poem on His Birthday," is demonic, you have to chortle with glee at some of the figures. But it is the way the metaphors are identified with the meaning to emphasize it and to universalize and dignify it that is the proof of the poet's ability. You may not like such poems but prefer a more reasoned mode but this is impassioned poetry, you might call it drunken poetry, it smacks of the divine—as Dylan Thomas does also.

The analytic spirit that might have made him back-track and reconsider, building a rational system of thought and technique was not his. He had passion and a heart which carried him where he wanted to go, but it cannot be said that he did not choose what he wanted.

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ISABELLA GARDNER

## When a Warlock Dies

When a warlock dies his rout of lemans, demons, fallen angels and Familiars bend to the brewing of elegiac potions, fruity runes plumped with their dead's distinctive spells, mournful marketable meads composted of his rich remains.

As an apprentice witch, a mere familiar of Familiars, my sunday-go-to-funeral broomstick (wreathed with mistletoe) is handy to bestride in a cortege, to stir the baked meats, or to fly a'wake-ing. Surely this deft-dirged, over-oded, buzzard-hungry, heron-lonely, phoenix-hearted, gull-lunged hummingbird-pulsed, falcon-winged and lark-tongued Chanticleer has crowed his own Farewells and Hails. And not all the ink and drink and spunk from Wichita to Wales will wake this cock. The homage of our elegies whistles against that night that looms too close for comfort since his death and our uncomfortable respite. The roaring riming of this most mourned Merlin canticles his praise, and His and ours, and Jerichos the walls of heaven with a surfing shout of love, and blasts of flowers

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## For Dylan Thomas

# On the Day of His Death

*(Translated from the Italian by Frances Winwar)*

You in whose name I hear the dying tide,  
My brother, though unknown,  
What deeps engulf you where you now abide?  
We know but this:  
What only yesterday was the sad spoil  
Of sense, becomes today  
The humor that will nourish our last flower,  
Becomes the limp and gray  
Leaf of November. For this was your month,  
My brother, who for every fallen spray  
Torn from its branch  
Felt on your heart  
From that spray's fall an agony descend.

You were a poet too, my unknown brother,  
And meditated with the Grecian sage  
To learn of life and also learn of death.  
And alone was your heart,  
Desert and lone your spirit. Yet the breath  
Of mortal bloom is sweeter on the air  
If no hand touch it, and it grows more fair  
Another day if left upon its stalk.  
Still from that desert flourished your sweet song  
Though none to hear it, and its sound, though dim,  
Reached the admiring heavens' farthest rim,  
Whence its last strain  
Returned in pity to the lonely singer.  
So wandered back again,  
With useless olive to the now safe ark,  
The hopeful dove, before the break of day.

Our day is here and floods of golden fire  
Bedew the grass. Ah, throw away your pen,  
My pensive brother!  
Come to this solemn and querulous choir  
Of amorous birds! See, the plow is now breaking  
The hard stubborn soil. See the plowman, content.  
Put down your pen and live. That is the key  
To such contentment as you do not know:  
To be a clod, a child, a shepherd, yes, to be  
A plant or stone,  
Or a sheep even, never more to think  
Or to think only  
To eat this day the little bread you have  
With no thought for the nurture of tomorrow.  
For what avails it, O my unknown brother,  
To be a poet but to know death's sorrow?

Perhaps in thought the poet's instinct lies,  
As for the herd to ruminate in shade,  
And for the blossom in the kindling May  
To burst resistless into splendid flower.  
Ah, break your pen, my brother! All dismay  
Is cowardice before the universe.  
Your fairest verse  
Is made of words and words have little power  
To change man's destiny just as his laughter  
Cannot arrest the pointing hand of Death.  
Now matter's weight  
Arrests your freighted brain  
And you lie pale in the last calm of earth.  
No longer can you see the tanned rich man  
Buying your very thinking with his gain  
That he be spared from thought.  
No longer will you hear it said that nought  
Rings true except the sound of clinking gold,  
And not the poet's songs—the poet's pain.

What do you now, my brother, in the hushed  
New life whose peace  
May mean at last that earthly troubles cease?  
If you are poet still  
And cherish yet  
That you were man and poet,  
What your dreams?  
And what do you regret?  
Perhaps the rebirth in your ardent sphere  
Of all the roses  
That dawn withered here.  
It may be that you long again to live  
Your mortal misadventure now the night  
Hangs vast and endless, with no hope of light  
And heavier than the thought of yesterday.  
But I shall speak no more,  
For he that lives in time  
What can he say to one in timelessness?

Ah, but you spoke  
And with such ringing words  
As filled the silence of our patient sorrow,  
And we knew hope and knew that the seed's pain  
Would be the flowering glory of tomorrow.  
So on an ancient day  
The song of Orpheus, dead, across the land  
Spread, to each distant way,  
And all the hills and all the heavens listened,  
And all the waters and, to pity moved,  
Listened all hearts, and once again a peace  
Came over life, for the great gift of death.

## Lament for Dylan Thomas

He is dead.  
The bird of Rhiannon.  
He is Dead.  
In the winter of the heart.  
He is dead.  
In the canyons of death.  
They found him dumb at last,  
In the blizzard of lies.  
He never spoke again.  
He died.  
He is dead.  
In their antiseptic hands,  
He is dead.  
The little spellbinder of Cader Idris.  
He is dead.  
The sparrow of Cardiff.  
He is dead.  
The canary of Swansea.  
Who killed him?  
Who killed the bright-headed bird?  
You did, you son of a bitch.  
You drowned him in your cocktail brain.  
He fell down and died in your synthetic heart.  
You killed him,  
Oppenheimer the Million-Killer.  
You killed him,  
Einstein the Grey Eminence.  
You killed him,  
Havanahavana, with your Nobel Prize.  
You killed him,  
Benign Lady on the postage stamp.  
He was found dead at a New Republic luncheon.  
He was found dead on the cutting room floor.  
He was found dead at a Times policy conference.  
Henry Luce killed him with a telegram to the Pope.  
Mademoiselle strangled him with a padded brassiere.  
Old Possum sprinkled him with a tea ball.  
After the wolves were done, the vaticides

Crawled off with his bowels to their classrooms and quarterlies.  
When the news came over the radio  
You personally rose up shouting, "Give us Barrabas!"  
In your lonely crowd you swept over him.  
Your custom-built brogans and your ballet slippers  
Pummelled him to death in the gritty street.  
You hit him with an album of Hindemith.  
You stabbed him with stainless steel by Isamu Noguchi.  
He is dead.  
He is Dead.  
Like Ignacio the bullfighter.  
At four o'clock in the afternoon.  
At precisely four o'clock.  
I too do not want to hear it.  
I too do not want to know it.  
I want to run into the street,  
Shouting, "Remember Vanzetti!"  
I want to pour gasoline down your chimneys,  
I want to blow up your galleries.  
I want to burn down your editorial offices.  
I want to slit the bellies of your frigid women.  
I want to sink your sailboats and launches.  
I want to behead your children at their finger paintings.  
I want to poison your Afghans and poodles.  
He is dead,  
The little drunken cherub.  
He is dead,  
The effulgent tub thumper.  
He is Dead,  
The ever living birds are not singing  
To the head of Bran.  
The sea birds are still  
Over Bardsey of Ten Thousand Saints.  
The underground men are not singing  
On their way to work.  
There is a smell of blood  
In the smell of the turf smoke.  
They have struck him down,  
The Son of David ap Gwilym.  
They have murdered him,  
The Baby of Taliessin  
There he lies dead,  
By the Iceberg of the United Nations.  
There he lies sandbagged,  
At the foot of the Statue of Liberty.  
The Gulf Stream smells of blood  
As it breaks on the sands of Iona  
And the blue rocks of Canarvon.  
And all the birds of the deep sea rise up  
Over the luxury liners and scream,  
"You killed him! You killed him!  
In your God damned Brooks Brothers suit,  
You son of a bitch."

## On the Death of Dylan Thomas

By definition, poets are posthumous. They begin to live after their death, and during their lifetime they walk about with a foreknowledge of death. Countries tend to kill their poets because those forces which protect the common good must expel the unusual and the secretive. Since poets are always proposing orphism as a way to understand the world, or as a way to exist in the world, and since orphism is a secret cult, they are fatally suspect and marked. Yet this massacre of the poets is indispensable to their efficacy.

Before his death, Dylan Thomas gave to the world certain poems which were events and which had nothing to do with current events. They appear to us today incorruptible, and will persist despite all the commentaries which will be made about them. They are so incorruptible that they severed, before his death, all bonds with the poet. We had learned to read them without thinking of the poet as a living man. They gravitated within us as certain poems of Baudelaire and Rilke gravitate, and we had joined Thomas with those poets who offer us consolation for the meaningless words which prevail in the world and which precipitate the minor and the major catastrophes. All of nature is expressed when a plant is disguised in the form of medicine, and all of human nature is expressed when the heart of a poet is disguised in the form of a poem.

The poet's fate often seems to have a timed precision about it. Prometheus steals the fire and is struck down by lightning. Nerval really explores his dream world and is found hanging in the rue de la Vieille Lanterne. Reprobation for a poet easily turns into malediction. Thomas was perhaps less harassed and less tragic than poets like Rimbaud and Laforgue, but he had the same will to turn the world back into its original transparency. His destiny was as regal and as fragile as theirs. Like them, he had no fear of mingling with the shades who wandered about in his mind. They helped to provide him with the freedom and the freshness of his speech, with his inventions of rhythm and imagery. His poems are identified with that absolute youthfulness of the world which makes life, as it is transcribed into verse, always present.

He was a poet because he never analyzed the movement of life from the outside. He joined himself, in his poetry, with the movement of life in the world. He taught us once again that man can make his way into the heart of a reality far more profound than the emotions which man is able to invent about that reality. His death was solitary in the sense that poetry separates the poet from other men. Real poetry is neither description of the world nor flight from the world. It is fullness. The example of Thomas shows that it is the reestablishment of communion between man and the world. The exercise of poetry is properly speaking a spiritual exercise because it moves man close to the sources of life.

Dylan Thomas had not waited for eternity in order to become himself. The expression of his face, and his voice, testified as fully as his poetry, to a way of thinking and feeling foreign to most men. Death exists throughout his poetry as a theme of obsession. His own death has now converted this perpetual meditation into a powerful integrated experience. It is accomplished now. And we know, more clearly than before, that the real lover of death is the real lover of life and beauty. The great singers of death: Whitman, Rilke, Thomas, have been the poets who lived passionately.

The voice, now silenced, added an exceptional degree of glory to the verse. All emotions were in it: sighs, the caressing of the humblest objects, the exaltation of flowers and landscapes, moments dedicated to thought. The music of that voice made us forget that once the poet had struggled long and hard with the words of his speech. The poems will have to wait now for other voices, other intercessors, to bring to life the seasons, the cities; the hills, the multiple aspects of life which Dylan Thomas has fixed forever by means of his attentiveness, his science, his fervor.

At his death, a poet's career seems to us, for a time at least, a skillful counterpoint compounded of the eternal and the ephemeral, of the elements of life which are profoundly faithful, and those which are unknown, ecstatic, voluptuous. But it is counterpoint which makes progress, which advances along the way of signs and the knowledge of symbols. A fruit tree, for example, waiting in a state of total tranquillity for its destiny to be achieved, can summarize the figuration of the universe for a poet. Goethe once confided to Eckermann that he wanted to learn nature by heart so that if as a poet he needed any given object, it would be at his disposal. This is the mnemonic art which Baudelaire later was to define as the sovereign method for the artist's creation. Thus, even when the eyes of such artists are closed, the world remains total and coherent for them. Their intelligence is constantly guided by the poet's major inspiration, that of recomposing the meaning of all the elements of the world.

No matter what the fate of the finished work may be, this gigantic inspiration, which causes every poem to seem like a fragment of the whole, is transmitted from poet to poet. As recently as 1933, the poetry of Heine was publicly burned. We often wonder whether the legend was wrong which says that Orpheus was able to enchant the beasts of the forest. But it is wrong to countenance such doubt. The poet's role of catalyser of human hate causes them to wear throughout their life and after their life the signs of men who are unknown. As a poet's fame increases, so any real knowledge of him becomes obscured.



# The Romantic Heritage of Dylan Thomas

The literary heritage out of which the poetry of Dylan Thomas emerges may be given the general title of "neo-romanticism," in which the later poems of W. B. Yeats and of Edith Sitwell (and it is not without grace of temperamental affinity that Miss Sitwell praised Thomas' *25 Poems*) provided a precedent for the arrival of Dylan Thomas. Other precedents exist in the richness of Welsh poetry itself, and the annual festivals in Wales of poetry read aloud in which the survivals of the North Druid myths are as vivid as they were a thousand years ago. Still other sources are to be found (particularly in Thomas' recent devotional poems, the "Vision and Prayer" cycle in *Deaths and Entrances*) in *The Temple* of George Herbert, for *The Temple* is not unknown to Welsh readers of English devotional poetry. Nor should a true "ancestor" of younger Welsh writers in England be forgotten—Arthur Machen, whose imaginative writings have gone through at least four cycles of neglect and appreciation, and are as cheerfully alive today as ever. But the "neo-romantic" scene has still other figures, among which Walter de la Mare extends a heritage from Beddoes, John Clare, Poe and Darley; and as one turns from the elder poets, the American, Hart Crane, and the Anglo-Irish George Barker seem to be immediate forerunners of the kind of lyricism that Dylan Thomas found congenial to his gifts. One should also include Henry Treece and Vernon Watkins among Thomas' immediate contemporaries, who, like Barker, reach toward a richness of expression that had been denied such poets as MacNeice and C. Day Lewis who are often betrayed by their facility into the charms of writing "magazine verse," or colorful epithets, which may amuse or shock the eye, but fail to attach their brilliance to profound centers of human emotion or intellectual meaning. If I seem to imply that the overtly journalistic and admittedly "neo-classic" school which discovered *A Hope for Poetry* before 1939 has suffered reverses, that is the impression I wish to convey. Of that still "young" and yet "elder" generation, W. H. Auden, by virtue of his gifts and his imagination, is the sole survivor of what was fashionable not so many years ago.

## II

The term "neo-romanticism" does not, of course, define the specific nature of Dylan Thomas' or any other poet's poems, but it does indicate the more general atmosphere and heritage to which a poet's writings may belong; such terms as "classical" and "romantic" are always in danger of being used as weapons of abuse or as tarnished laurels, and as we come closer to an actual reading of Thomas' poems, another term, "Symbolism," rises into view. This is all very well, but since Arthur Symons published *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in 1899, conscious elements of Symbolism and the techniques employed by the Symbolists have entered the main streams of poetry in

English on both sides of the Atlantic. In respect to Thomas' poems one can say this: "That which so closely resembles the technique of Symbolist poetry in his poems is of the same nature that guided W. B. Yeats in his re-creations of the Celtic myth that he drew from the lives of those around him and himself, and drew also from the writings of Dr. Douglas Hyde and Standish O'Grady. In Yeat's poems, those that had been written before 1912, the French Symbolists served as examples, as 'guides,' rather than 'masters'—and it is safer to conclude that he did not follow them literally, but in a more active sense, attracted some features of their technique to the centers of his imaginative being. Anyone who has read the sources of a literature sprung from 'the myth,' and particularly the North Druid myth, soon becomes aware of their likeness to some features of so-called 'modern' Symbolist poetry in English. Thomas' poems, including "The Hunchback in the Park" and "Among those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred," show something of the same method that Yeats employed, a 'drawing power,' a fusion of 'mythological' reality with individual perception. And it is to be noted that Thomas' word order often carries within it characteristically Welsh phrasing."

One index to Thomas' poetry is found in his book of autobiographical short stories, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* and its first story, "The Peaches," is a view of things seen and heard in many of Thomas' poems. The "place" of the story is a country-side in Wales, and the "time" is childhood, literally the "time" when things are seen for the first time and at first hand. The description of "the best room" in a farm house has the very elements, the "keepings," and one almost says the "furnishings" of a number of Thomas' poems; they are the centers of which Thomas' characteristic imagery springs and to which it returns:

"The best room smelt of moth-balls and fur and damp and dead plants and stale, sour air. Two glass cases on wooden coffin-boxes lined the window wall. You looked at the weed-grown vegetable garden through a stuffed fox's legs, over a partridge's head, along the red-paint-stained breast of a stiff wild duck. A case of china and pewter, trinkets, teeth, family brooches, stood beyond the bandy table; there was a large oil lamp on the patchwork tablecloth, a Bible with a clasp, a tall vase with a draped woman about to bathe on it, and a framed photograph of Annie, Uncle Jim, and Gwilym smiling in front of a fern-pot. On the mantelpiece were two clocks, some dogs, brass candlesticks, a shepherdess, a man in a kilt, and a tinted photograph of Annie, with high hair and her breasts coming out . . ."

Another paragraph from the same story has other characteristic "keepings" which are brought to light again in Thomas' poems:

"I remembered the demon in the story, with his wings and hooks, who clung like a bat to my hair as I battled up and down Wales after a tall, wise, golden, royal girl from Swansea Convent. I tried to remember her true name, her proper, long, blackstockinged legs, her giggle and paper curls . . ."

And still another scene from the story has a farm boy preaching a sermon from a wagon used as a pulpit. It is perhaps gratuitous to remark the well sustained prose rhythm, the shrewd, yet innocent blasphemy, and the wit that is contained in the following passage:

"I sat on the hay and stared at Gwilym preaching and heard his voice rise and crack and sink to a whisper and break into singing and Welsh and ring triumphantly and be wild and meek. The sun, through a hole, shone on his praying shoulders, and he said: 'O God, Thou art everywhere all the time, in the dew of the morning, in the frost of the evening, in the field and the town, in the preacher and the sinner, in the sparrow and the big buzzard. Thou canst see everything, right down deep in our hearts; Thou canst see us when the sun is gone; Thou canst see us when there aren't any stars, in the gravy blackness, in the deep, deep, deep, deep, pit; Thou canst see and spy and watch us all the time; in the little black corners, in the big cowboys' prairies, under the blankets when we're snoring fast, in the terrible shadows, pitch black, pitch black; Thou canst see everything we do, in the night and the day, in the day and the night, everything, everything; Thou canst see all the time. O God mun, you're like a bloody cat.'"

In the above quotations one also begins to see the limitations and ranges of Thomas' vocabulary: "black" is among Thomas' favored adjectives, and the subjective associations of the "Ballad of the Longlegged Bait" (which is included in *Deaths and Entrances*) are clearly shown in the phrase, "proper, long, black-stockinged legs." The "myth" of the "Ballad" is taken from a familiar group of North Druid myths, and the "myth" or story is also implied in one of Walter de la Mare's poems.<sup>1</sup> Thomas, by drawing it to the center of his own imagination—an example offered by the poems of de la Mare as well as Yeats—has made the "myth" his own. The mock-sermon provides a precedent for the "Vision and Prayer" cycle in *Deaths and Entrances*, for blasphemy, whether in the best or worst sense, always admits the consciousness and the reality of religious being—and therefore, T. S. Eliot's "The Hippopotamus" has its place in forecasting the arrival of *Ash-Wednesday*. The relationship between Thomas' prose and poetry may be shown by comparing the first passage I have quoted with a few lines from his poem, "In Memory of Ann Jones":

Morning smack of the spade that wakes up sleep,  
Shakes a desolate boy who slits his throat  
In the dark of the coffin and sheds dry leaves.  
That breaks one bone to light with a judgment clout,  
After a feast of tear-stuffed time and thistles  
In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern.

There has been some talk of "Freudian imagery" in more than a few of Thomas' poems, and certainly Thomas has shown no fear in employing sexual imagery of which the elegy, *The Tombstone Told When She Died* is a magnificent illustration:

The tombstone told when she died.  
Her two surnames stopped me still.  
A virgin married at rest.  
She married in this pouring place,  
That I struck one day by luck,  
Before I heard in my mother's side  
Or saw in the looking-glass shell  
The rain through her cold heart speak  
And the sun killed in her face.  
More the thick stone cannot tell.

Before she lay on a stranger's bed  
With a hand plunged through her hair,  
Or that rainy tongue beat back  
Through the devilish years and innocent deaths  
To the room of a secret child,  
Among men later I heard it said  
She cried her white-dressed limbs were bare  
And her red lips were kissed black,  
She wept in her pain and made mouths,  
Talked and tore though her eyes smiled.

<sup>1</sup> The title of de la Mare's poem is *The Old Angler*, and the story behind it is glimpsed at in William Morris's poem, *A Garden by the Sea* and in W. B. Yeats's *Song of the Wandering Angus*. This is not to say that Thomas did no more than follow in the wake of Morris, Yeats and de la Mare, for the poem is his own poem whatever its inspiration may have been. Undoubtedly the story as it is known by four poets is a romantic one.

I who saw in a hurried film  
Death and this mad heroine  
Meet once on a mortal wall  
Heard her speak through the chipped beak  
Of the stone bird guarding her:  
I died before bedtime came  
But my womb was bellowing  
And I felt with my bare fall  
A blazing red harsh head tear up  
And the dear floods of his hair.

Is this poem more "Freudian" than a poem by Blake or by D. H. Lawrence or some passages that may be found in the poetry of Coleridge? I would say no more and no less. This is not to underestimate the general influence of Freud upon the poetic imagery of twentieth-century writings in both prose and verse—but the influence, as it exists in Thomas' poems, is more general and more diffuse than Thomas' relationship to the romantic tradition. And I may as well add, as a matter of opinion, that twentieth-century claims for the "modernity" of sex have been greatly exaggerated.

### III

In the foregoing paragraphs I have attempted to show something of Dylan Thomas' regional identities, the charm of his highly individual imagination as well as his affinity to a larger, unevenly gifted body of "neoromantic" literature. Among his elders only Yeats and Edith Sitwell and Walter de la Mare are poets of greater and more accomplishment than he; the others, including George Barker and Henry Treece, who seem to have responded to the same impulses that have moved Thomas (and Barker's early poems preceded Thomas' and were in print before Thomas' style had taken form) have fallen prey to the forces of "easy writing" and a tendency toward disintegration. *Death and Entrances* is, I think, his best single book of poems and it also represents a tendency, unlike that of his younger contemporaries, toward a greater integration of his imaginative life. That tendency has evidence in the way he has rewritten such poems as "Into Her Lying Down Head" and "When I Woke," for the changes are those that unify time and place in the two poems and increase the attraction of their central imagery.<sup>2</sup> There can be little doubt that Thomas is becoming an excellent critic of his own work, which is a distinction he has gained above many of his contemporaries. I regret that in a paper as short as this the last poem, "Fern Hill", in *Death and Entrances* is too long to quote in full and I have no desire to give the reader less than the complete view of its fine proportions—it is one of Thomas' superlative poems, and for its pastoral qualities alone, it deserves a place in the near company of Wordsworth's early poems.<sup>3</sup>

Two shorter and no less characteristic quotations must take the place of "Fern Hill," the first because of its implied debt to George Herbert, and the second because it shows that in wartime England, Thomas has lost none of his early power to write "When all my five and country senses see." The first quotation is from his *Vision and Prayer*.

<sup>2</sup> The reader may contrast and compare versions of the same poems published in *Poetry* before 1943, in *New Poems* (New Directions, 1943), and in *Deaths and Entrances* (J. M. Dent, London, 1946).

<sup>3</sup> In particular I am referring to Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, one of the best poems of its kind in English. In our day Thomas' *Fern Hill* has the same accents of an immortality. Both are rare in their power to recreate the spell of memory and the world of nature seen through the eyes of childhood. In this respect both poems convey similar emotions to the reader.

In  
The spin  
Of the sun  
In the spuming  
Cyclone of his wing  
For I who was lost am  
Crying at the man drenched throne  
In the first fury of his stream  
And the lightnings of adoration  
Back to black silence melt and mourn  
For I who was lost have come  
To dumbounding haven  
And the finding one  
And the high noon  
Of his wound  
Blinds my  
Cry

The second is "Among Those Killed in the Dawn Raid was a Man Aged a Hundred":

When the morning was waking over the war,  
He put on his clothes and stepped out and he died,  
The locks yawned loose and a blast blew them wide,  
He dropped where he loved on the burst pavement stone,  
And the funeral grains of the slaughtered floor.  
Tell his street on its back he stopped a sun  
And the craters of his eyes grew springshoots and fire,  
When all the keys shot from the locks, and rang.  
Dig no more for the chains of his gray-haired heart.  
The heavenly ambulance drawn by a wound,  
Assembling waits for the spade's ring on the cage.  
O keep his bones away from that common cart,  
The morning is flying on the wings of his age,  
And a hundred storks perch on the sun's right hand.

The poem with its clear reflection of an incident that commonly happened in Europe and Asia since 1914 has none of the usual attributes of war poetry and talk of war. It is, first of all, a poem, and what it has to say is conveyed with greater immediacy than all speculations of comparative safety and of disaster, and in "Fern Hill" Thomas purges his images of "Dawn Raid" with the sight of peace in childhood "Under new made clouds and happy as the heart was long." His immediacy is of a kind that is rare in contemporary writing—its only danger lies in its inability to relax the eye and ear—and it has achieved the unities of time and place, speech and accent.

#### Postscript.

In saying a few words about the romantic heritage of Dylan Thomas, I have reprinted with a few changes, a short essay I wrote for *Poetry* (Chicago) in 1947. The main point of the essay was to insist on, however briefly, the timelessness of Thomas' poetry. At that time Thomas was regarded in some quarters as a war poet and a somewhat violent Freudian, and I was in disagreement with these views. The incident of Thomas's death which came with a sense of loss to all serious readers of contemporary poetry has not changed my opinion, but has convinced me that his best poems are, if anything, more alive today than they were seven years ago.

The best possible tribute to Thomas's memory is to reread *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* as well as the poems included in *Death and Entrances*. The stories and the poems still serve to clarify and complement one another; as the stories so eloquently show, he balanced passionate utterance with Welsh humours and excellently native wit. The best of his recordings of poetry deserve a further chapter to be written of him and his accomplishment.—1954

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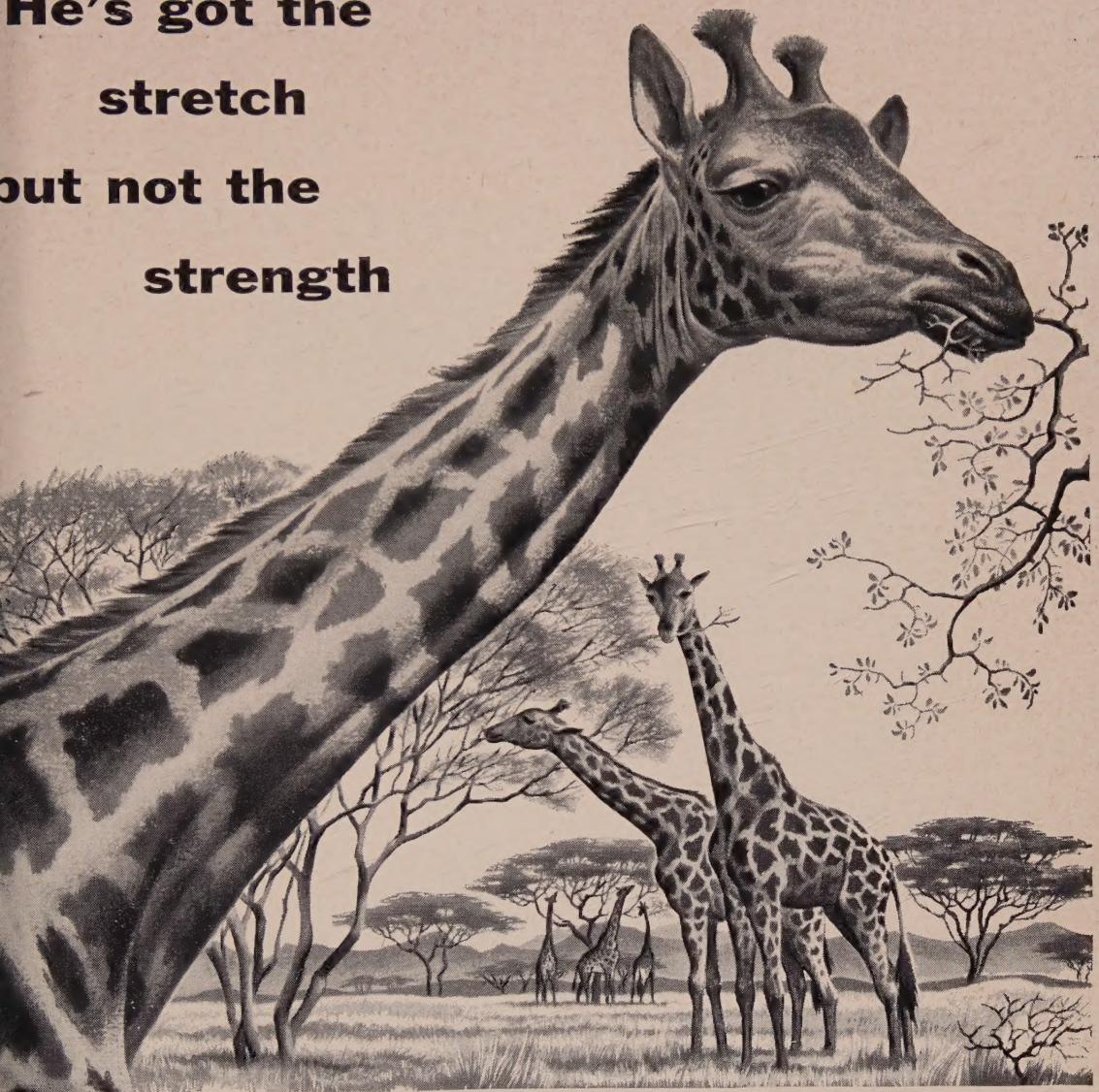
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